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Top U.S. intelligence officer cites spread of Soviet spies

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John A. Walker Jr., a retired Navy radioman, drove the country roads of Maryland one day this May like a man suffering from amnesia. He turned down this road and then that one with no apparent goal and for no apparent reason.

Behind him, far behind him, FBI agents trailed in an unmarked car careful never to lose sight of their prey.

Just outside Poolesville, Walker got out of his car and placed a bag containing classified Navy documents under a tree. Although a Soviet diplomat was seen driving in the area that night, nobody came to claim the bag. Later that night, Walker was arrested and charged with espionage.

In the days that followed, other arrests were made — Walker's son Michael, a yeoman aboard the carrier USS Nimitz; his brother Arthur, who once taught anti-submarine warfare at the Atlantic Fleet Tactical School; and associate Jerry Whitworth, another radioman who did two tours at a secret U.S. base in the Indian Ocean.

It was the biggest spy scandal to hit this country in decades and senior military officials were justifiably concerned. What documents did the Walkers turn over to the Soviet Union? Did the information compromise the United States submarine forces, the key link in America's nuclear triad?

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger said there were "very serious losses." The chief of naval operations later called the security breach "very serious" but "not catastrophic." Walker, after all, hadn't been in the sub service since the late 1960s, he rationalized.

One man who followed the Walker spy case closely is Vice Admiral Edward A. Burkhalter Jr., a

former Navy commander and head of the undersea warfare division who is now this country's highest ranking military intelligence officer. He discussed the Walker case and the state of American intelligence during a recent interview with The Item.

"I think the long-term damage from the Walker case will probably be fairly slight," Burkhalter said.

Burkhalter conceded, though, that through the Walkers and Whitworths, the Soviets gained information about American military communications systems and "some Navy operations."

"We were very concerned at first, but I think overall the damage will be pretty slight. But it still makes my blood curdle to think of guys who served 20-25 years betraying their country."

Walker is a perfect example of the modern spy, according to Burkhalter. He is not a Communist sympathizer motivated by ideological leanings, but a man who got used to life in the fast lane and couldn't let go.

"The Walker case is a classic one of a guy financially strapped. Once caught in that web it's very hard to get out," he said.

The real villain in this spy drama is the KGB, according to Burkhalter. Through any means necessary — threats, extortion, blackmail — the KGB finds and holds its spies. "Your life is never your own again," Burkhalter said.

Burkhalter's blood boils, if not curdles, at the thought of the KGB presence in this country. He said there are 1500 to 2000 "registered diplomats" from the Soviet Union living and working in this country, many of whom are agents of the KGB and GRU, the Soviet military intelligence agency.

Soviet officials attached to the United Nations in New York are free to go where they choose, he said. "They have no restrictions and, let me tell you, a lot of them are not only KGB officials but under the influence of the KGB."

Burkhalter said the KGB is "dedicated to acquiring our technology any way they can and they do it with cash."

"The Walker case is one indication of the large KGB presence here which we have to deal with," he said. "The question that arises is should we allow it? We have more espionage cases on our books today than at any time in our country's history."

The admiral said he supports a proposal by Vermont Sen. Patrick Leahy to limit the Russian diplomatic presence in this country to the number of U.S. diplomats allowed in the Soviet Union. He called the policy one of "reciprocity."

The admiral rejected the suggestion that the KGB and CIA perform similar intelligence functions throughout the world. In response to a question about Nicaragua, he said the CIA is "only there trying to combat their (Soviet) influence in a very small way."

"The influence of the Soviet totalitarian state is hard for the average American to comprehend," he said.

Burkhalter said he spoke recently to a defector from the guerrilla movement in El Salvador who said he was "trained in Havana...and trained in Moscow all expenses paid." It is no secret, he said, that arms to the guerrilla movements in Central America are supplied directly from the Sandinista government in Nicaragua by the Soviet Union.

If not for the presence of the CIA and direct support to the Contra rebels fighting the Sandinistas, Burkhalter claims the "same kind of totalitarian revolution

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tionary concept could have spread" throughout the region. He called the Soviet Union's increased presence in the region "very disturbing."

Another of many subjects discussed during a wide-ranging interview was the quality of American intelligence in the Middle East in light of the recent hijacking of a TWA jetliner by Shiite Moslem terrorists. In some quarters, the Reagan administration has been criticized for not knowing immediately who the hijackers were and, later, for not retaliating.

"It's a very complex problem because there are so many different factions," Burkhalter said. Still, though, he said "we know who they (the hijackers) are."

The thirst for revenge was tempered by the knowledge that any retaliation could jeopardize the lives of the seven Americans still held captive in Lebanon, he said.

Despite occasional embarrassments — like the revelation that the CIA supplied the contras with an assassination manual — the image of the CIA is "probably as good as it has been in the last couple of decades," he said.

Burkhalter said the CIA received 150,000 job inquiries last year. "Morale has never been higher," he said.